

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE D.C. 9

WASHINGTON POST
7 June 1984

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Strategists Fear Catastrophe In Iran-Iraq War

There is foreboding inside the Pentagon and the State Department that the Persian Gulf crisis is bound to end up a catastrophe. I have seldom seen the strategists so worried.

I believe the public has a right to know the undisguised truth about the glossed-over dangers. Here's what is troubling the experts:

- President Reagan's national security affairs adviser, Robert C. McFarlane, has been described as a "can-do" man. He wants a show of strength in the gulf. He believes fiercely that the United States should tolerate no more humiliations in the Mideast. The weight of U.S. power behind Iraq, he apparently believes, would tilt the military balance against Iran.

But the strategists have warned that there is no easy way to force a military solution in the gulf. They believe McFarlane is boldly in pursuit of the wrong policy. The best strategy, they argue, is to prevent trouble, not provoke it.

- Under the "Carter Doctrine" reaffirmed by Reagan, the United States is committed to defend the

gulf "by any means necessary, including military force." The experts don't see how this can be done with the available conventional muscle in the area. It might mean a confrontation with Iran, and the implications are forbidding. The nuclear contingency has been discussed.

- The public has been assured that America is following a policy of strict neutrality in the gulf. But in secret, the White House has been issuing orders that can hardly be called neutral. Cables have gone to U.S. allies, urging them to stop providing war materiel to Iran.

On July 5, 1982, I reported that Saudi Arabia was "lobbying earnestly for a Reagan administration 'tilt' toward Iraq." A quiet "tilt" is now in effect. The fear in the Pentagon is that Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini will strike back at the United States, that he will cross the tripwire and U.S. forces will be compelled to take action against Iran. The Soviet Union, which is committed by treaty to defend Iran, has 26 divisions near the Iranian border.

- Khomeini is a villain of almost supernatural proportions who has a history of hostile behavior toward the United States. It wouldn't take much to arouse Americans against him. This could create inflammatory conditions that would discredit saner public figures and inflate firebrands. Yet my intelligence sources assure me that Khomeini is not as irratio-

nal as he appears. Behind the scowl, he is shrewd and pragmatic. Iran trades with the Western world, scrupulously pays its debts and would prefer to keep the gulf open. The attacks on oil tankers were started by Iraq, not Iran. So war with Iran is by no means necessary, sources told my associate Lucette Lagnado.

- The war has gone badly for the Iraqis, who started it. Assuming the role of Allah's avenger, Khomeini does not intend, clearly, to let Iraq's Saddam Hussein go unpunished. Hussein has used everything from poison gas to French Etendard jets to save himself. As I reported Oct. 11, 1983, "The Iraqis are suspected of hoping to provoke a crisis that would force the United States to support their war effort." This still appears to be their strategy, and it appears to be working.

- So far, Khomeini has outmaneuvered U.S. strategists. He threatened to shut the Strait of Hormuz and cut off oil to the West if his own oil production were menaced. But apparently no one anticipated that the Iraqis and Iranians would bomb tankers. The United States would be hard-pressed to police the entire gulf and stop the random tanker attacks.

Reagan, meanwhile, is grappling with what to do. He came out of the Lebanon experience more cautious, less impulsive. But he still doesn't like to see the United States pushed around—least of all by Khomeini.